Beyond 'Juggling' and 'Flexibility': Classed and Gendered Experiences of Combining Employment and Motherhood

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Abstract

This paper proposes that there is a need to push beyond the popular discourses of 'flexibility' and 'work-life balance'. Developing a feminist-Bourdieuian approach and drawing on three illustrative case studies from my interview research with 27 mothers in the UK, I show the importance of maintaining a focus on class and gender inequalities. In the first part of the paper the concepts of capitals, dependencies and habitus which shaped, and were shaped by, this interview research are discussed. An analysis of three women's accounts of their experiences across work and family life is then used to illustrate that although these women all used terms such as 'flexibility' and 'juggling' in describing their work, the experience of that work was crucially influenced by their histories and current positioning. Tracing each of these women's trajectories from school, attention is focused on the influence of differential access to capitals and relations of dependency in the emergence of their dispositions toward work. Overall, the paper points to the significance of examining the classed and gendered dimensions of women's experiences of employment and motherhood.

Keywords: Class, Gender, Women, Employment, Motherhood, Feminism, Bourdieu, Habitus, Life-Course, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

1.1 Employment and motherhood have been at the forefront of popular and political debates in the UK over recent years. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Department of Trade and Industry launched their 'Work-Life Balance' campaign focused on the promotion of flexible working practices in employment. 'Family friendly' policies have been promoted as the solution to problems involved in combining employment with parenting. Accounts of women who combine the dual responsibilities of paid work and child-rearing have entered the popular imagination with books such as Allison Pearson's (2002) *I don't know how she does it* and *SHE* (2005) magazine which is targeted at women who 'juggle their lives'.

1.2 In this context, questions concerning class and gender inequalities are increasingly sidelined, becoming 'unthinkable' as we come under a barrage of images and reports about flexibility and balance. These questions, which urgently need asking, include: why does it continue to be *women* who juggle? Who juggles and what is juggled with what resources? Crucially, that it is generally *women* who continue to perform the unpaid *work* of childcare and domestic labour is neglected, or is taken-for-granted as 'natural'. Also, that working-class women in the UK have been 'flexible' for many years in combining employment with motherhood is disregarded in recent debates which tend to construct 'flexibility' and 'balance' as new challenges (Ferree 1985, 1987; Glucksmann 2000; Reynolds 2001).

1.3 In this paper I wish to shift the focus to explore the ways in which women's experiences of work are shaped by classed and gendered processes. I bring the issue of inequalities around class and gender to the fore, arguing that an adequate analysis of women's working patterns requires attention to the way work is lived differently by different women. In other words, I set out to address the question: How are experiences of employment and motherhood classed and gendered?

1.4 Recent evidence on the position of women in employment in the UK suggests increasing inequalities related to social class, and greater divides amongst women along class lines (Bradley 1999; Walkerdine et. al. 2001; Warren 2003). As Warren (2003: 607) observes, a distinct 'pole' has emerged in the female labour force in the UK, comprising a minority of highly educated, professional women who are following more

'male-like' continuous and full-time employment trajectories by remaining childless or by purchasing childcare. This group of middle-class women (who are likely to have grown up in middle-class homes, Warren 2000) can be contrasted with the majority of women for whom the 'traditional female pattern' of discontinuous employment in low-status, low-paid and part-time jobs persists (Bottero 2000; Dex et. al. 1996; Walby 1997; Warren 2003).

1.5 However, the divide between women by class does *not* mean that gender is becoming a redundant variable. Warren's (2003: 625-626) research on gender and class divides in income and wealth led her to argue that:

> … there are persistent social divisions amongst women that are continuing to produce severe non-gendered economic inequalities. Yet, at the same time, the experiences of even the highest-achieving women workers are shaped by gender… it is clear that gender… remains an invaluable explanatory variable for our understanding of economic security in its fuller sense.

Accordingly, in my research I aim to attend to both the classed *and* gendered dimensions of women's lives. In the following sections I provide an overview of the major concepts informing my research, detailing my understanding of class and gender and how these categories may be understood as intersecting and becoming embodied through the habitus.

Capitals and access

2.1 Following Bourdieu (1987: 3-4), class in this research is understood in terms of access to different forms of capital:

> The social world can be conceived as multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed in a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the powers or *forms of capital* which are or can become efficient, like aces in a game of cards, in this particular universe, that is, in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this universe is the site. It follows that the structure of this space is given by the distribution of the various forms of capital, that is, by the distribution of the properties which are active within the universe under study- those properties capable of conferring strength, power, and consequently profit on their holder.

The different forms of capital identified by Bourdieu are principally economic (income, wealth, financial inheritances), cultural (e.g. educational qualifications, social taste, language) and social capitals (resources based on networks and group membership). In this view:

> Class divisions are defined not by differing relations to the means of production, but by differing conditions of existence, differing systems of dispositions produced by differential conditioning, and differing endowments of power or capital. (Brubaker 1985: 761).

Capitals are convertible or transformable in that the various types can be exchanged for other types.

2.2 Releasing social class from the narrow confines of occupational positioning acknowledges that class reaches beyond the work one does or the income one earns. Crucially, the subjective dimensions of class are acknowledged, attending to the way differential access to capitals shapes one's identity and approach to the world. Walkerdine et al. (2001: 38) argue:

> Bourdieu's theorisation of social class highlights the sensitivity of our cultural antennae to the qualitative, subjective, micro-distinctions through which social class location is expressed and understood.

2.3 Using Bourdieu's framework therefore allows for a sensitive assessment of class as a process or practice, as a matter of degrees rather than an exercise in strict categorisation:

> … his analysis of class does not depend on objective economic or indeed political criteria alone for its foundation, but on a broad-ranging account of class practices which includes food tastes, clothing, body dispositions, housing styles and forms of social choice in everyday life, as well as the more familiar categories of economy and polity. This extended exposition of class along a range of parameters does not dissolve class into a Weberian account of 'lifestyle' or reduce its power. Rather, it extends the force of class analysis, both in the *range* of its explanatory power, and in the *subtlety* of its classifications. (Wilkes 1990: 109).

Thus, in 'classing' the interviewees in my research[1] I used a number of indicators of economic capitals and cultural capitals (occupation, educational qualifications and institutions attended, language, leisure activities, housing).

2.4 In the case studies presented below, I point to the way that the interviewees' family background, through conferring differential access to capitals, influences their subsequent trajectories. Having access to financial and informational resources influenced the women's capacity to move in social space, shaping the parameters of their worlds and how they could live in these worlds.

Dependencies

3.1 I combine a Bourdieuian approach with a feminist perspective which has been informed by research attending to the gendered position of women in worlds of work. This includes feminist accounts of the labour process (e.g. Hartmann 1979) which have pointed to the productive character of unpaid work performed in the home largely by women. A second influence has been the formulations of 'ethic of care' feminists (e.g. Gilligan 1982; Benhabib 1992), who have argued that the conception of the self in dominant moral theories is reflective of aspects of male experience. For example, Benhabib (1992: 155) has criticised the universalistic theories of Hobbes and Rawls, arguing that:

> An entire domain of human activity, namely, nurture, reproduction, love and care, which becomes the woman's lot in the course of the development of modern, bourgeois society, is excluded from moral and political considerations, and relegated to the realm of 'nature'.[2]

3.2 A third influence has been the writing of feminist political economists (e.g. Gardiner 2000) who have been critical of the current organisation of the labour market which they see as structured according to the model of an independent masculine self in full-time continuous employment. These writers have envisaged different ways of organising paid employment in order to recognise individuals- both women and men- as dependent upon others and having care responsibilities throughout the life-course (e.g. decreased hours of paid employment, for both men and women, to enable more time to be spent on unpaid care work).

3.3 Although recognising diversity within the above research, it is possible to identify a central concept which runs throughout, that of 'dependencies'. In their critiques of the way the (illusory) independent masculine self has been privileged across several domains in Western societies (Bordo 1993; Gilligan 1982; Thompson 2000), feminists have highlighted the ways in which 'the self' is necessarily connected to others and dependent upon the labour of others, frequently women: the emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Reay 2000), the work performed 'back stage' by wives, mothers, partners, secretaries, researchers (Reay 1998; 2004), and the work of those fixed by the mobility of privileged others (Skeggs 2004).

3.4 In my research I adopt and develop this concept of dependencies, identifying different forms (e.g. financial, practical, and emotional) and relations of dependency between the interviewees and their parents, partners and children. Thus, in the case studies below I show how each of the three women were differently dependent upon others in their families, and in turn, how various family members were dependent upon them.

Habitus

4.1 I conceptualise women's dispositions toward their work as employees and mothers using the concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). I suggest that the habitus is both classed and gendered,[3] in that an individual's disposition to the world and others in this world is shaped by their location in relation to both their access to capitals and differing dependencies. Habitus refers to individuals' ways of being, acting and approaching the world:

> …social agents are endowed with habitus, inscribed in their bodies by past experiences. These systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action enable them to perform acts of practical knowledge, based on the identification and recognition of conditional, conventional stimuli to which they are predisposed to react; and, without any explicit definition of ends or rational calculation of means, to generate appropriate and endlessly renewed strategies, but within the limits of the structural constraints of which they are the product and which define them. (Bourdieu 2000: 138).

4.2 In other words, habitus points to the 'incorporation of the social into the body' (McNay 1999: 95). The concept is used by Bourdieu (1987; 1990) in accounting for the way individuals' expectations and preferences come to reflect the objective conditions in which they were formed, such that:

> Those who occupy the same positions have every chance of having the same habitus, at

> least insofar as the trajectories which have brought them to these positions are themselves similar. The dispositions acquired in the position occupied involve a sense of adjustment to this position- what Erving Goffman calls the *'sense of one's place'.* (Bourdieu 1987: 5).

4.3 This process of shaping perceptions, action, and dispositions draws attention to the influence of history and the way that the collective is carried by and through the individual, becoming embedded and experienced as part of oneself. Reay (1998: 47) observes:

> In place of a narrow focus on where people are located currently, habitus emphasises the importance of the social location people have come from, as well as highlighting the social space they have moved through, in order to reach their current position.

4.4 Habitus acknowledges that individuals are born into particular contexts, and that there are collective histories which influence both the space of possible courses of action, and shape the desirability of these different courses of action. Individuals thus enter:

> … an inherited social space from which comes access to and acquisition of differential amounts of capital assets. From being born into gender, class and race relations we occupy the associated social positions such as 'woman', 'Black', 'working-class' (Moi 1991). We also inherit ways of understanding; we inherit the meanings associated with social positions and positions in knowledge. (Skeggs 1997: 8-9).

4.5 Some have contended that habitus is at the centre of a weakness in Bourdieu's approach since it appears difficult to explain processes of social change using the concept. As Lovell (2000: 17) argues, accounts 'which posit a glovelike "fit" between habitus and social position are in danger of binding subjectivity too tightly to the social conditions in which it is forged'. In view of this criticism, I adopt a conception of habitus as a 'mediating' construct or 'generative structure', not a determining one (Harker et. al. 1990: 12; McNay 1999: 100), the crucial element in its formation being that of practice (Lau 2004).

Choice of method

5.1 My contribution to the debates around women's work lies in its potential to address the specific *understandings and experiences* of differently located women in the context of the UK at the beginning of the 21st century. I used in-depth interviews[4] to gain an insight into the worlds of the women, exploring how they went about, and understood, their everyday lives across family and work. These issues are difficult to address by relying exclusively upon quantitative material. As Bertaux and Thompson (1997: 7) have observed in their discussion of the strengths of using interview data rather than the survey method in the field of social mobility research:

> … life stories show the centrality of subjective perceptions and evaluations in shaping the life choices. They are redolent with descriptions of feeling and experience of relationships with significant others, with interpretations of turning-points, with influences which were rejected rather than followed, with dreams of lives that might have been.

5.2 Each of the interviews was loosely structured around three topics: the women's past, their present position and their future expectations. The structuring of the interviews was informed by my theoretical framing, which places an emphasis upon the importance of past events in shaping the present and future, as well as being influenced by my reading across work which has used the concept of the 'life-course' (e.g. Graham 2002; Bertaux and Thompson 1997; Bynner et. al. 1997). This focus allows for a fuller appreciation of the ways social change becomes embodied in individuals' life trajectories, taking into account processes of informal and formal socialisation, changing social contexts, as well as contingencies which can bring about diversions from expected trajectories. In using this approach, emphasis is placed on the importance of a simultaneous focus on both 'looking inward' to the personal, in terms of the particular position and experience of individual women, as well as a focus upon the social, 'looking outward' to the contexts in which these women were embedded (Probyn 1993; Scott 1992).

5.3 I now move on to present illustrative case studies drawn from my larger sample of 27 women. These case studies focus upon the accounts of three interviewees[5]: Mary (middle-class), Judith (working-class) and Laura (inter-class[6]). While all of these women used terms such as 'flexibility' and 'juggling' in referring to their working lives, crucially, *how* these terms were used varied significantly. In each case I summarise the interviewee's position in work at the time of the interview and proceed to examine the emergence of their dispositions toward work by analysing their trajectories from leaving school.

Mary: A disposition of compromised-individualism

6.1 At the time of the interview, Mary was employed in the education sector. She was married and had one child who was 18 months old. For two days a week the child attended a nursery and two days were spent with a childminder. Mary had negotiated a reduced working week to enable her to have one day at home with her child. Mary felt overstretched by the demands on her time:

> *… at the moment I feel like I'm spinning a lot of plates and they're all… very precarious (laughing). I don't feel any of them are kind of spinning particularly well… I'm just about keeping them going. (Mary, 31 years old, middle-class, white)*

Mary's husband worked long hours as a lecturer and although he tried to take more responsibility for childcare during the weekends, he had recently been using this time to study. In the future, Mary expected that he would become the primary earner and she would reduce the number of hours she spent in paid work.

6.2 Mary had grown up in a middle-class family, her father was a lecturer and her mother had stayed at home to care for Mary and her brother. Mary tended to present her educational trajectory from school to university as the natural order of things, obscuring the fact that this path was only accessible to a privileged few.

6.3 Previous research (e.g. Lareau 2003; Reay 1998; Walkerdine et. al. 2001) has documented the ways in which family, friends and schools are crucial in the inculcation of middle-class dispositions and expectations. From Mary's experience, it would also appear that parental economic, cultural and social capitals play a 'protective' role in insulating (or isolating) individuals from other (non-middle-class) influences. She told me that she had been brought up in an area which had many of the problems associated with inner-cities and that most of the girls in her school year had 'got pregnant' or 'got a job'. However, the economic and educational capital of her family had set Mary apart from her peers. In describing her own and her brother's upbringing Mary said:

> *My mum and dad were encouraging because my dad… he lectures at university, so I think there was always an expectation that we'd go through that route.*

6.4 The social networks of her parents meant that Mary mixed with young adults who also came from a middle-class family background. In this way, the social and cultural capital of her family contributed toward the shaping of a middle-class habitus, such that Mary could describe her educational trajectory as 'fairly traditional' when it would have been atypical in the area in which she was brought up.

6.5 In her teenage years Mary had kept a diary and recalled that:

> *I always wrote down that I really wanted to travel, and I really wanted to do a lot of things… I think I knew I was going to do all these independent things.*

6.6 Mary fulfilled these desires during her early adulthood, going to university, doing voluntary work overseas and being employed as a teacher. This trajectory was largely dependent upon access to the capitals of her parents, both in terms of inculcating the expectation and desire to do 'lots of independent things', as well as providing the material means to do so. In turn, Mary's experiences across education, travel and paid work were productive of her own economic, social and cultural capitals.

6.7 In discussing her early experiences in paid work, Mary talked about the level of satisfaction she had found in her work. This satisfaction partly derived from being in positions of responsibility:

> *I find that I've enjoyed my managerial role as well… it's given me a different experience and a different viewpoint and sort of having that bit of responsibility… And being kind of respected with that responsibility has been quite interesting and kind of nice…*

For Mary, mobility was both expected and embraced and she looked forward to further changes in her career since she feared becoming stuck in a dull environment:

> *…the thought of being like in the same job for twenty years just scares me to death, I kind of like to have a bit more movement than that.*

6.8 Though Mary's lifestyle during her early adulthood can be understood as consolidating her 'independence', this 'independence' was 'illusory' in that it was dependent upon considerable resources. These resources comprised the capitals associated with her privileged background and the labour that goes into creating this form of autonomous self (Reay 1998; Lawler 2000; Thompson 2000). It is important to make visible these resources, otherwise there is a danger of reproducing the popular myth of meritocracy, that success depends upon hard work and individual ability, an illusion which is particularly prevalent in

contemporary society (Thomson et. al. 2003: 34).

6.9 Mary had met her husband-to-be when she was 25 years old and had her child at 29. Her experience of having autonomy and control over her life had been compromised since becoming a mother. She had found the early months of motherhood difficult, describing herself as feeling 'shell-shocked' at home with a newborn. The experience of being overwhelmed and feeling unprepared for motherhood has been similarly reported by middle-class women in other studies (e.g. Bailey 2000; McMahon 1995).

6.10 Mary expressed her dissatisfaction that household chores had increasingly encroached into the time she spent doing activities with her child and in the future she hoped to decrease her hours in paid work to allow her to enjoy more of this 'quality time'. She envisaged that her husband's career would take priority and that he would become the main 'breadwinner'. Mary's husband had continued to work long hours in the hope of promotion and further qualifications. In turn, his accrual of further economic, educational and social capitals was dependent upon Mary taking primary responsibility for their child.

6.11 Mary confided that she feared becoming 'dulled down' by the years of child-rearing and expressed concern to hold onto her sense of 'self':

> *… you feel you've got to be all things to all people [as a mother], it's quite, it's hard, because I think somewhere in there you've got to hang on to that bit of yourself which I'm kind of desperately trying to do… just hanging onto that sense of self thing, I think that's my big thing.*

She explained that she valued the time she spent working away from home twice a year because this provided some space in which she could reflect upon her life:

> *…it's a bit, kind of for me… time where I'm not wife and I'm not mum, I'm just away on my own, and that for me is a really important part of why I do that.*

6.12 The 'self' has been the subject of much discussion in previous research about working mothers (as well as taking centre stage in recent social theory more generally, e.g. Beck 1992; Giddens 1992). For example, Bailey (2000) discussed the importance of the 'project of the self' in the lives of the middle-class mothers in her research, drawing attention to the ways in which self-development figured in the women's narratives about their paid work and mothering role.

6.13 The centrality of the self is both classed and gendered (Skeggs 2004; Adkins 2002). As the following case study of Judith will illustrate, the working-class women in my sample did not share the middle-class mothers' concerns over a loss of the self. Rather, Judith's upbringing in a working-class family and her experiences of work fostered the construction of a caring self which was more continuous with the relational work of mothering. It is therefore a *particular* type of self, an 'independent-entitled self', that is in danger of being lost with the onset of motherhood.

6.14 Mary's reference to 'spinning too many plates' reflects the way she saw her time as being devoted to separate activities (paid work, housework, childcare, and leisure time). This perception was itself influenced by Mary's trajectory from leaving school. Her experiences across education, travel and employment had led to value being placed upon having 'independence' and control in her life. The demands of being a primary caregiver had compromised this individualism at the same time as offering different satisfactions associated with the practice of mothering.

Judith: A disposition of relational-pragmatism

7.1 Judith was working 20 hours in her job as a home carer to elderly people and two nights per week in a take-away. She was married and had three children. Since becoming a mother, Judith had done a variety of jobs in retail, cleaning and caring. When her children were younger she had worked evenings, going out to work when her husband returned from his job as a manual labourer. Judith described her job as a home carer:

> *… it's a flexible job… because it's for the elderly people I obviously have to be out… every morning and I have to work the odd weekend… but they can just add on extra clients where I have to go to… so it is really a flexible job anyway. I knew that before I took the job. (Judith, 37 years old, working-class, white)*

Throughout her marriage, Judith had taken primary responsibility for the childcare and housework. She did not foresee any major changes in her life in the future.

7.2 Judith had grown up in a working-class family where there had been a shortage of economic capital.

She recalled walking to school with holes in her shoes and not being able to afford 'silly things' like sanitary towels. These conditions of material hardship had precluded any consideration of further education:

> *It was like, you go to school if you leave it's up to you, you've got to find money to give us [her parents] board.*

7.3 Judith left school and went to work in a factory. This meant she could pay her parents board and have some money to buy 'nice things' which she had not had during her childhood. As other writers have noted, such a desire for material items is frequently derided as indicative of a trivial materialism by some middle-class people. This interpretation, made by those who speak from a position of relative comfort, overlooks the conditions in which the desire is formed, as well as neglecting the way in which material goods are important in claiming respectability (Steedman 1986; Skeggs 2004). The fact that getting a job was a financial necessity and went unquestioned points to the meaningless of applying a framework of 'choice' in an analysis of Judith's trajectory from school. Judith did not even consider higher education as a possible course of action. As Skeggs (2004: 139) states:

> Those who suggest that choice is universal betray the social position from which their perspective emerged. Choice is a resource, to which some lack access and which they cannot see as a possibility; it is not within their field of vision, their plausibility structure.

In describing her teenage years, Judith said:

> *I just used to go out with my friends, drinking. I suppose I was looking for someone, not knowing who, but I think I was looking for someone to be with, I wanted to be with somebody and to get married and to have a happy life.*

7.4 Judith had left home when she got married at the age of 20 years. She had her first child at 23. Unlike Mary's experience of child-bearing, motherhood did not appear to be a disruptive experience for Judith. Although she did confront difficulties during her early motherhood, Judith appeared to approach these demands with an attitude of pragmatism. Her first child had been seriously ill as a baby and required treatment in hospital. During this period, Judith became unexpectedly pregnant again. She recalled how she got through these difficult months:

> *[My first child] was vomiting blood all the while and so that was a horrible time. Not a nice time in my life, like when heavily pregnant and he was vomiting this blood and stuff like this and then he'd got to go and have his operation. It was hard, but I think sometimes facing these hard things and getting through them it makes you a better person, like coping. You can cope with anything if you want to, but it was a trying time.*

7.5 I would suggest that the difference between the experiences of motherhood lies in the personal histories of these interviewees. Unlike Mary, Judith had become accustomed to caring for and serving others, lacking sufficient capitals to enable the pursuit of a lifestyle in which she was the author of her own biography as suggested by theorists such as Beck (1992).[7] Judith's experiences seemed to foster the construction of a habitus characterized by pragmatism and care-giving. In this context, looking after a newborn baby was not seen to entail significant sacrifice. Rather, providing for the needs of another appeared as an extension of the work in which she had previously been occupied.

7.6 Since having her first child Judith had needed to work in various part-time jobs because money had been 'tight':

> *I've always worked since I've had the children… I decided to get a night job so when my husband came home from work he could take over the child and I could go out to work…*

Judith seemed to express a relational disposition toward her work in that her paid employment was perceived as part of being a mother. She explained that the income enabled her to provide material things for her children, things which she had lacked during her own childhood:

> *I mean I go to work to, my money… when I get paid monthly… I spend it on the kids, or if I need like decorating done it goes into the house or into the kids, it don't go anywhere else and like I say I work at a [take-away] two nights a week and that money's saved in the bank and we go on holiday... So everything's for the family or for the house, it is all for the family.*

7.7 Fitting employment around motherhood was presented as a taken-for-granted pattern by Judith and was seen as allowing 'the best of both worlds'. However, the long-term implications of this pattern may be negative. As Warren (2004) observes, part-time working has been lauded as holding the potential to help women with families integrate and balance 'home and work', particularly lower level jobs which tend to be

less demanding and less stressful due to fewer responsibilities, but as she emphasises, this work is less financially secure and often characterised by poor working conditions.

7.8 Judith's reference to having a 'flexible' job indicated her perception that she needed to be flexible in responding to the demands of her work which were changeable. She took a pragmatic approach to these conditions as being part of the nature of the work. Her childhood experience had influenced the way she perceived providing materially for her children as part of being a mother. Judith appeared to hold a more seamless and relational view of her life in comparison to Mary. Paid work was fitted in around mothering and housework. In turn, Judith's income helped to provide a better childhood for her children relative to her own upbringing.

Laura: A disposition of ambivalence

8.1 Laura was due to begin a new job working 25 hours per week as a disability support worker at the time of the interview. She was living with her partner and had one child. Laura had previously enjoyed being self-employed. However, she had found the sporadic and unpredictable character of her work difficult to combine with motherhood, leading to her search for a salaried position. Laura was looking forward to beginning her new job:

> *… it's 25 hours and it's flexible. The only two days that aren't are Tuesday and Wednesday… so at least I'll have that flexibility. (Laura, 43 years old, inter-class, white)*

8.2 Laura took primary responsibility for the housework and childcare. She resented her partner since his life had remained much the same since the birth of their child whereas she had given up so much. Laura blamed his lack of involvement on his employment which required long inflexible working hours. She hoped that when their child was older she would be able to regain control over her life.

8.3 Laura's disposition could be described as ambivalent. This ambivalence seemed emergent from her upward mobility from a working-class family to a middle-class position. Laura recalled the material conditions in which she had been brought up:

> *I come from a very impoverished background… I don't sort of recall a very sort of happy, relaxed childhood, it was always rather stressful and not… much in the way of books or toys…*

As Laura herself recognised, the difficulties emanated largely from the family's circumstances of material hardship:

> *I don't blame my parents in any way for this 'cos they didn't have the education and they didn't have the money and… they were so sort of beaten down by just the daily grind.*

8.4 During her teenage years, Laura recalled that she had felt different from her peers and kin. She had been an avid reader and believed that reading had fed her imagination, nurturing an ambition to travel and 'have a career'. She had eschewed make-up and clothes shopping during her teenage years. Whilst her peers had been interested in boyfriends and having fun, Laura had wanted to travel and escape.[8]

8.5 Laura stayed on at school to do her 'A' Levels, even though her parents couldn't see the point. Through her relationship with her boyfriend who was attending university, Laura gained access to important 'insider information' (Bettie 2003: 152) about application processes and university life, knowledge that is taken for granted by more privileged families. She applied and went to university but struggled to 'fit in', lacking the economic, cultural and social capitals of her middle-class peers:

> *…there were so many sort of social and cultural things that I just didn't understand, even to do with like food and all sorts, you just don't realise that you've just not been in certain situations… things like having dinner parties …and all those things like going for interviews, just not knowing what you were supposed to wear or what the protocol was, there were sort of so many gaps in my vocabulary… just holding a discussion because that had been taboo at home (laughs), so sometimes just being in lectures and having to discuss things and thinking but I don't… what do they want me to say, what should I be saying…It took me a long time to learn that actually having your own opinion is worthwhile, is okay, and that you just have to learn to articulate that…*

8.6 Following graduation, Laura had enjoyed a variety of research positions and travelled widely. In referring to her lifestyle during her late twenties, Laura said:

> *I probably had the best sort of two and a half years of my life… working right in the middle*

of [the city]. I mean, I just love all that architecture. I managed to buy the most fabulous flat with a garden. I had money, I had higher living standards than I'd ever had before…

8.7 At the same time however, Laura also appeared to lack confidence in her abilities. These feelings of insecurity seem to mark the experience of women in other research who have occupied the space between a working and middle-class position (e.g. see Lawler 2000: 114). Laura described her feelings and those of friends who had also experienced upward mobility:

… we all came from financially impoverished and educationally impoverished backgrounds. We've all had to fight, we all say why is it that we've no confidence, none of us have got any confidence, we all find lots of things really sort of traum[atic]… and yet, I can see that if I'm in a meeting situation or an interview that I come over as being very confident, and really it's all a bluff, you know, I'm a good actress (laughing).

Similar feelings of inadequacy have also been documented by many academics from working-class family backgrounds, who have variously referred to their fears of being 'found out', revealed as a 'fraud' or an 'imposter' (e.g. Kuhn 1995; Reay 2000, 2004; Jones 2003; Long et. al. 2000).

8.8 Laura had met her partner during her late twenties. She had never wanted children and her pregnancy was unexpected. Laura recalled the loss of control she had felt upon becoming a mother:

I'd gone from being completely autonomous… To somebody who didn't exist, basically… I resented my partner- I mean I must say that for a good 2 years I absolutely hated him, because he was still him, he'd still got his PhD, he was still going to work, he was still earning an income, he was still who he was, I was just a drudge…

Motherhood was seen to threaten all that she had worked hard to achieve: financial independence, autonomy, control and job satisfaction. The resentment seemed to stem from the fact that Laura had never wanted children and that her partner's life had remained largely unchanged by fatherhood. Laura's experience of upward mobility appeared to add to these feelings. It was as if Laura had discovered how life *could* be and therefore came to experience the constraints she was encountering in terms of a loss of her previous lifestyle.

8.9 However, Laura was ambivalent towards motherhood. Over the years she had come to value the pleasures her child had brought:

What would life have been like… if I was living by myself and didn't have a partner and didn't have a child, what holidays would I have, I wouldn't have known what it was like to breastfeed, what it was like to cuddle a tiny baby… just have him run out of school and give me a big hug and you think no, in my sane moments… I wouldn't have missed this.

Laura's statement that 'at least I will have some flexibility' was indicative of her feelings of ambivalence. Her position as primary caregiver had led her to 'sacrifice' a career which she had worked hard to achieve while her unpaid labour had enabled her partner to continue in his career. But these feelings of resentment were set alongside the unanticipated pleasures associated with motherhood. Thus, Laura had mixed feelings about beginning her new job. On the one hand, it would be less stressful than her previous experience of combining self-employment with motherhood. On the other hand, it signalled a loss of her previous life as an ambitious 'career woman'. It appeared that in gaining something that she had once lacked, Laura was reluctant to give it up.

Conclusions

9.1 In this paper I have proposed that it is important to move beyond recent rhetoric concerning 'juggling', 'flexibility' and 'work-life balance' to attend to the classed and gendered dimensions of women's work patterns.

9.2 The case studies show the ways in which the meaning of such terms varied significantly according to the women's classed and gendered trajectories. Flexibility for Mary was something she, rather than her husband, had negotiated with her employer to allow her to spend more time with their child. In contrast, for Judith 'flexible' was something she needed to *be* in response to the demands of her job. For Laura, flexibility was double-edged. Flexible hours were seen as reducing the difficulties she had previously encountered in combining employment with motherhood but were also associated with the sacrifice of her career. In each case, the meaning and understanding of flexibility was influenced by the women's past and present positioning.

9.3 This paper therefore points to the significance of examining how different patterns of combining

employment and motherhood are *experienced* by women. It shows the importance of exploring how various working patterns arise through studying biographies and through engaging with the ways women value and understand different practices. It also illustrates the complexity of the interactions and contradictions between classed and gendered processes, showing how these processes are lived and pointing to the changing shape of these interrelations over the life course.

9.4 Further research in this field of women's work is required to attend in greater detail to the complex interrelations between class and gender, as well as ethnicity and sexuality[9], by addressing the issue of change over the life-course and by attending to the global character of divisions of labour (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Tronto 2002).

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Notes

[1]For further discussion see Armstrong (2005) *Classed and gendered experiences of combining employment and motherhood.* Unpublished thesis, Lancaster University.

[2]The association between femininity and connectedness, and masculinity and autonomy is viewed here as being socially constructed and does not assume an essentialist foundation. As Bourdieu (2001: 3) states:

> The biological appearances and the very real effects that have been produced in bodies and minds by a long collective labour of socialization of the biological and biologicization of the social combine to reverse the relationship between causes and effects and to make a naturalized social construction ('genders' as sexually characterized habitus) appear as the grounding in nature of the arbitrary division which underlies both reality and the representation of reality and which sometimes imposes itself even on scientific research.

[3]Though I theorise class largely in terms of capitals and gender by reference to different forms of dependencies, I recognise that these categories cross-cut and interact in practice. For example, it is possible to refer to the symbolic capital associated with gendered ways of being, in that the care work performed largely by women receives little recognition. As Skeggs (1997: 10-11) argues: 'Femininity brings with it little social, political and economic worth. It is not a strong asset to trade and capitalize upon.'

[4] In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 women, all mothers, employed across a range of occupations. These women were aged between 28 and 43 years. 13 of these women lived in the West Midlands, 12 women were white, and 1 black; 12 women had lived in England from birth (1 whose parents had moved to Britain from Ireland, 1 whose parents had moved to Britain from Jamaica) and 1 woman had been born and educated in Ireland. 14 women lived in Lancashire, 13 of whom were white, 1 black; all 14 had lived in Britain from birth (1 whose parents had moved to Britain from Austria, and 1 whose parents had moved to Britain from Jamaica). Conducting the interviews in two localities was principally for practical and opportunistic reasons.

[5]All of the interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

[6]In describing the class location of those interviewees who had experienced upward mobility, I use the term 'inter' to signify the lived-out contradictions of being in-between classes, feeling a sense of belonging to neither. This experience of mobility is not adequately conceptualised using the term 'transition' since this term implies movement from one position to another, which 'can belie the simultaneous nature of the past / present as an important aspect of subjective experiences' (Hughes 2004: 541). In other words, these women had not fully 'left behind' their working-class past since it continued to inform how they could occupy their present middle-class positioning (For other descriptions of this positioning, see: Bettie 2003; Jensen 1998; Steedman 1986; Reay 2004; Walkerdine and Lucey 1989).

[7]As Walkerdine et. al. (2001: 3) argue, the notion of individuals being able to produce their own biographies seems to be an overly optimistic reading of the dilemmas confronted by individuals attempting to live and work in contemporary conditions of social and economic uncertainty.

[8]A similar pattern of the rejection of local versions of femininity was found by Thomson et. al. (2003) in their research with young women growing up in a socially excluded area in the UK. In one case study they describe the process whereby a young girl dissociated from her local community and friendship networks and 'deferred' active heterosexuality and womanhood in order to pursue her education.

[9]Both of which were outside the scope of the current paper.

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